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Abstract

The study of conflict has been of primary interest in various fields such as organizational psychology for decades (e.g., Barki & Hartwick, 2004). In sport psychology however, conflict research has been almost non-existent (Lavoi, 2007) with few exceptions (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Sullivan & Feltz, 2001). The importance of understanding conflict in sport and in groups however has been acknowledged because it has potentially serious implications for group outcomes (Lavoi, 2007). The present study investigated competitive sport athletes' perceptions of intra-group conflict in sport. Ten intercollegiate athletes: (n = 5 males, n = 5 females; M_{age} = 25.00, SD = 2.87) participated in semi-structured interviews. Athletes perceived the nature of conflict to manifest itself in several ways including (a) disagreements, (b) negative emotions, and (c) interference/antagonistic behaviors. In addition, conflict episodes were perceived to arise in task and social situations. The findings are discussed in terms of their contributions to current perspectives on intra-group conflict in sport.

Keywords: sport psychology, group dynamics, social psychology, conflict.

Athlete Perceptions of Intra-Group Conflict in Sport Teams

Group dynamics has been described as "a field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions" (Cartwright & Zander, 1968, p. 19). In the field of sport psychology, the study of group dynamics has increased our understanding with regard to the nature and measurement of various group constructs including: cohesion (e.g., Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985), role ambiguity (e.g., Eys, Carron, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2005), the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), coaching leadership (e.g., Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), athlete (peer) leadership (e.g., Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006), athlete satisfaction (e.g., Riemer & Chelladurai, 1998), collective efficacy (e.g., Short, Sullivan & Feltz, 2005) and team attributions (e.g., Greenlees et al., 2005). One construct in sport, however, that has generated relatively minimal research attention is intra-group conflict. For example, in a search of subject indices in various sport psychology textbooks, the term *conflict* failed to emerge (Lavoi, 2007). This is surprising considering the presence of conflict is believed to be inevitable in any group (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Lavoi (2007) also noted that conflict is an inevitable part of life and relationships, and, thus, is an important phenomenon to understand in sport teams.

To date, certain research projects have referenced conflict in sport—including studies of athlete participation and involvement in sport teams (Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo, 2008; Holt & Sparkes, 2001), friendships in youth sport (Weiss & Smith, 1999; Weiss, Smith, & Theebom, 1996), motivational climate (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005) and the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2003). The forms of conflict in these studies,

however, were assessed to gain a better understanding of other phenomena (i.e., motivational climate, youth sport settings, adherence).

One study that directly assessed the presence of conflict in sport examined the conflict-cohesion relationship in ice hockey teams (Sullivan & Feltz, 2001). The assessment involved the Group Environment Questionnaire (cohesion; Carron et al., 1985) and an untitled "conflict style measure" (conflict; Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988) which consisted of seven dimensions labelled *integrative tactics, topic shifting, personal criticism, showing anger, personal sarcasm, semantic focus,* and *denial.* The results indicated *topic shifting* (a "negative conflict style") was negatively related to task cohesion and social cohesion whereas *integrative tactics* (a "positive conflict style") was positively related to social cohesion.

A second study that examined conflict in sport focused on female intercollegiate athletes' perceptions of the sources of teammate conflicts (Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012). Through semi-structured interviews, the results indicated the presence of conflict relating to performance (i.e., task) and relationships (i.e., social). In addition, with regard to conflict resolution, the participants suggested that conducting team building early in the season, addressing conflict early, having mediators, and holding structured interviews could help to manage conflict.

Despite the previous two studies, the lack of research attention directed towards intra-group conflict in sport is particularly disheartening when contrasted with the extensive research conducted in other fields of inquiry. For example, in organizational psychology, there has been more than 70 years of research on conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). At first glance, it might seem reasonable to assume that research assessing work groups can inform sport psychologists about the nature and correlates of conflict in sport teams. Work groups and sport teams do possess some strong similarities (Barker, Rossi, & Puhse, 2010). For example, outcomes such as

individual and group productivity, member satisfaction, and so on are of principal concern in work groups and sport teams. Also, there is a common interest in group dynamics constructs that might influence these outcomes—cohesion, leadership, role clarity, role acceptance, role satisfaction, and group culture among others. The utility of the findings from the body of research emanating from organizational psychology however is limited for two reasons.

One reason is the variety of *constitutive definitions* (and by extension, operational definitions) used as the bases for investigations. In one perspective for example, conflict is represented by *interference behavior* reflected by incompatibilities and interpersonal interference or obstruction (e.g., Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000). Characteristic of this perspective is the definition of conflict by Wall and Callister (1995) as "a process by which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (p. 517). Wilmot and Hocker (2001) also defined conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two persons who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 41). Although these definitions are useful, this perspective in and of itself is not sufficient to define conflict. Individuals may attempt to prevent each other from attaining their goals (e.g., two athletes that are competing for the same position on a team) but may not be in disagreement or hold negative feelings towards each other.

In another perspective, conflict has been defined by the existence of *negative emotions* (e.g., tension, jealousy, anxiety, frustration, anger, friction, hostility) in task and social situations (e.g., Jehn, 1994; Bodtker & Jameson, 2001). Characteristic of this perspective is the definition advanced by Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin, (1999): "a condition in which group members have interpersonal clashes characterized by anger, frustration, and other negative feelings" (p. 2). While conflict will undoubtedly spurn negative emotions in individuals, standing alone, this

perspective does not describe conflict entirely. For example, the persons involved may dislike each other based on personality, work ethic, personal attributes, or past experiences, but may not be in any specific disagreement or interference with one another.

From a third and perhaps most common perspective, conflict has been viewed as *disagreement*. Dahrendorf (1958) defined conflict as "all relations between sets of individuals that involve an incompatible difference of objective…" (p. 135). More recently—and representative of this perspective— is the work of Jehn and her colleagues (e.g., Jehn, 1995; 1997; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Jehn (1995) defined conflict as perceptions by group members that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities.

A limitation in any definition that treats conflict as simply a disagreement is that it might underrepresent the construct. Good friends can have discrepant views about issues or beliefs but not necessarily be in conflict with each other. In non-profit organizational settings, people deemed "conflict," too strong a word to describe disagreements or differences of opinion (Hamm-Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2011). Undoubtedly, disagreement is at the root of conflict, in that disagreements can escalate into conflict at which point it becomes far more complex and in-depth that just a disagreement on its own.

More recently, Barki and Hartwick (2004) conducted a comprehensive summary and evaluation of the research, constitutive and operational definitions, and conceptualizations advanced in organizational psychology. They suggested that after the 70+ years of scientific scrutiny, a generally accepted constitutive and operational definition for conflict is still disputed. They also highlighted common problems with many constitutive (and by extension) operational

definitions. For example, statements such as “arises from,” “occurs when,” or “exists when,” risk simply providing descriptions of the antecedents of conflict and/or the conditions under which it can occur without describing its fundamental nature. As Pondy (1967) elaborated “the term conflict refers neither to its antecedent conditions, nor to individual awareness of it, nor affective states, nor its over manifestations, nor its residues of feelings, precedents, or structure, but all these taken together” (p. 319).

Using their literature summary as a basis, Barki and Hartwick (2004) suggested that for an interaction between two parties to be considered a conflict, it must contain not only a disagreement, but also negative emotions, and interference behaviors to fully represent the in-depth, complex, multidimensional nature of the construct. Consistent with this suggestion, they defined conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234).

The second (related) reason why the utility of the findings from organizational psychology is limited in its utility for sport lies in its conceptual underpinnings (or lack thereof). Historically, the most promising conceptualization—one that has had the greatest impact on research over the past two decades—was advanced by Jehn (1995). This conceptualization formed the basis for an operational definition that has been used extensively by Jehn and her colleagues to study the effects of conflict on various group outcomes (e.g., Jehn, 1995; 1997; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003).

Jehn’s (1995; 1997) conceptual model is founded on the assumption that three types of intra-group conflict are possible: *task*, *relationship*, and *process*. According to Jehn, *task* conflict exists when disagreements (over performance issues) among group members occur about the

content of tasks being performed including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions. *Relationship* conflict exists when disagreements and interpersonal incompatibilities (e.g., tension, animosity) are present among group members. Finally, *process* conflict exists when disagreements arise in regard to the manner in which tasks should be accomplished (e.g., delegation). Despite the overall comprehensiveness of the conceptualization advanced by Jehn, it does possess one critical shortcoming—the perception that conflict is synonymous with disagreement—which risks underrepresenting the construct.

A conceptualization or typology of intra-group conflict was also advanced by Barki and Hartwick (2004). Their first main component—the one introduced above—is founded on the assumption that interpersonal conflict contains *cognitive*, *behavioral*, and *affective* components. These are represented by *disagreement*, *negative emotions*, and *interference behavior* respectively. The second main component is a distinction between the task and the interpersonal relationship contexts of conflict. Given that the conflict literature has focused on these two main contexts (i.e., task and relationship), they have proposed a two-dimensional framework comprised of the aforementioned disagreements, interference, and negative emotions experienced in the a) task processes and the b) interpersonal relationship contexts respectively.

The inclusion of both task and relationship considerations in any conceptual model for conflict seems reasonable. Historically, there has been a longstanding recognition among group dynamics theoreticians on the need to acknowledge both the *task* and the *social* orientations of groups (e.g., Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). From the perspective of the study of conflict in work groups, this task and social orientation also has been broadly supported (e.g., Amason & Sapienza, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Rahim, 2002). Finally, this

distinction also has had support in terms of the types of conflicts that arise in a sport setting (e.g., Holt et al., 2012). Holt and his colleagues found that *performance* (i.e., task) conflict is a product of issues centered on practice or competition concerns, and playing time, whereas *relationship* (i.e., social) conflict is a product of issues reflecting interpersonal disputes or disagreements and personality clashes—issues that are not directly related to performance. As such, the aforementioned literature supported the adoption of a two-dimensional model of task and social conflict as a conceptual starting point for the present study.

Assessing conflict in this manner is also gaining attention in the broader sport literature. Mellalieu, Shearer, and Shearer (2013) assessed interpersonal conflict within an entire sport organization (i.e., athletes, coaches, management, and support staff) from various national teams representing the United Kingdom at major sporting competitions (i.e., Olympics, world championships). The authors used the Barki and Hartwick (2004) definition as a framework for their research and assessed the frequency, intensity, and duration of conflict in these national teams, along with the cognitive, behavioral, and affective components. The importance of assessing conflict in groups is an important endeavour due to the inevitability of conflict (e.g., Robbins & Judge, 2010) and potential performance and relationship implications (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The overall influence of conflict has been well represented in organizational psychology as in the study from Mellalieu et al. (2013). In fact, they found that within the organizational structure, athletes reported the highest number of conflicts. Thus, the intricate nature of conflict between athletes within a team remains an important area to further investigate due to its implications for team functioning and was the primary interest of the present study.

The adoption of Barki and Hartwick's (2004) conceptualization for a sport setting seems to make intuitive sense. As such, we look to add to the sport psychology conflict literature by

adopting this approach. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to improve our understanding of the *nature* of intra-group conflict in sport through the perceptions of competitive level athletes. The relative paucity of attention paid to intra-group conflict led to some decisions about the protocol adopted. First, a qualitative methodology was used. This provided the opportunity to use participants as active agents in the research process. Second, the conceptualization advanced for intra-group conflict by Barki and Hartwick (2004) was used as a deductive frame-of-reference. Specifically, participants' responses were analyzed with a view to determining whether intra-group conflict in sport teams (1) occurs in both task and relationship (i.e., social) contexts and (2) contains cognitive (i.e., disagreement), affective (i.e., negative emotions), and behavioral components (i.e., interference).

Method

Participants

Our goal was not to obtain sport- or gender-specific insights into the nature of conflict as we wanted to obtain a generalizable assessment from athletes of both genders from multiple sports. Thus we set out to gain insights regarding the nature of conflict in sport using a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002). Four specific sampling criteria were established to recruit participants who could provide independent, insightful, and potentially heterogeneous responses. The first was to recruit an equal number of male and female athletes to obtain perspectives from both genders. The second was to recruit athletes with a minimum of two years tenure on their respective teams to ensure extensive competitive experiences. The third was to ensure that only one athlete representative from any given team participated; this ensured that awkward situations attending within teams were avoided. Finally, athletes were purposely recruited from a heterogeneous sample of teams and sports. The four criteria were used as a basis

for the selection of the sample to increase generalizability of results. Intercollegiate athletes that met the above criteria were recruited individually.

Participants were 10 current and former intercollegiate athletes (n = 5 males, n = 5 females) from Canadian universities. They ranged in age from 21 to 30 years (M_{age} = 25.00, SD = 2.87) and had a mean tenure of 4.0 years with their respective teams (Canadian intercollegiate athletes typically have five years of eligibility to play at the intercollegiate level). The first and third authors recruited and contacted athletes directly to participate in the study.

Certain athletes competed in multiple sports and thus drew from these experiences. Specifically, Athlete Seven competed in track and field and rugby and Athlete Nine in hockey and lacrosse. The five male participants (Mage = 25.0, Mtenure = 4.4 years) were Athletes Four (golf), Six, (ice hockey), Seven (track and field and rugby), Eight (volleyball), and Nine (hockey and lacrosse). The five female participants (Mage = 25.0; Mtenure = 3.6 years) were Athletes One (rugby), Two (volleyball), Three (curling), Five (rowing), and Ten (dance).

Procedure

Approval was obtained from the lead author's institutional research ethics board. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in an informal lab/office setting at the convenience of the athlete. The first and third authors conducted the interviews, which lasted approximately 20-40 minutes (20.12 - 39.55; M ~ 30 minutes). A semi-structured interview guide was used following general recommendations from Rubin and Rubin (2011). The set-up of qualitative protocols used in past group dynamics research (e.g., Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009; Martin, Carron, Eys, & Loughead, 2011) served as a general template to develop the interview questions for the present study.

The outline for the semi-structured interviews contained four sections: *introductory questions*, *transition questions*, *key questions*, and *concluding questions*. The goal of the introductory questions was to obtain demographic information from the athletes as well as to "break the ice" and begin the interview process (e.g., "What sport do you play?" and "How long have you played?"). The transition questions sought to direct attention towards the notion of conflict and conflict experiences within the team (e.g., "How often would conflict arise in your team?" "What sort of conflict would arise in your team?" and "What form did the conflict take?"). The key questions—which represented the main inquiries of the interview—were designed to gain insight into the athlete's perceptions of the nature, antecedents, and consequences of conflict in teams (e.g., "How would you define conflict?" "What are some typical indicators that a team has conflict?" and "What goes on in a group with conflict?" the present study however only deals with issues surrounding the nature of conflict). Finally, concluding questions were used to obtain any final thoughts, to clarify any issues that were discussed, and to conclude the interview (e.g., "Is there anything that you would like to add?" and "Is there anything you did not get a chance to say?").

Analysis

Each interview was audiotaped and the lead author transcribed the interviews verbatim. This process resulted in 145 typed (double spaced) transcript pages that were uploaded into the Nvivo 9 qualitative statistical software program where data were categorised and coded. Specifically, meaning units, which Tesch (1990) defined as "a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information" (p. 116) were created. Thus, a meaning unit could reflect a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph of text.

A thematic analysis was used and the coding was carried out using a combination of an inductive (e.g., Côté, Baria, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993) and deductive approaches (e.g., Munroe-Chandler, Hall, Fishburne, & Strachan, 2007). An inductive analysis is grounded in the data whereas a deductive analysis is guided by a theoretically informed framework (Patton, 2002; Tesch, 1990). The inductive approach involved the identification and classification of emerging themes from the data while the deductive approach was based on a conceptual understanding; in the present study this consisted of (a) the task versus social distinction of conflict, and (b) the cognitive, behavioral, and affective components of conflict. As Munroe-Chandler et al. (2007) noted, researchers always have some initial hypothesis based on previous theory.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings; self-reflective bracketing was undertaken before conducting any interviews (e.g., Benson, Eys, Surya, Dawson, & Schneider, 2013). This strategy allowed the first author to reflect on his own experiences of conflict as a former intercollegiate athlete (e.g., Dale, 1996) and to acknowledge any preconceptions or biases held about the topic to become more aware on how such biases might influence the data collection process or data analysis process (e.g., Giorgi, 2009). Member checks were also performed after the interviews whereby participants could add or omit information, all of which served to corroborate the data. With regard to data analysis, the first and second authors coded the transcripts together and reached 100% agreement before item categorisation (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2002; Sparkes, 1998). Finally, as a means of analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002), critical review of meaning units and an expert audit review were performed whereby all three members of the research team reached a triangular consensus (Sparkes, 1998), which confirmed the categorization of results.

Results

Responses were categorized on the basis of *task* versus *social*—the context in which the conflict occurred. Responses were categorized based on their reference to *cognitive* (e.g., disagreement), *affective* (e.g., negative emotions), and *behavioral* manifestations (e.g., interference) of conflict. In the sections that follow, the results pertaining to the nature of conflict are presented initially (i.e., where a distinction between task and social contexts was not apparent) followed by a presentation of the nature of conflict in task and social contexts.

The Nature of Conflict

Cognitive. A common reference in the discussions of the nature of conflict was to disagreement. For example, Athlete Eight (a volleyball player) suggested that: "in the broad context, I would think of it [conflict] as a general disagreement on one topic or potentially one goal…where people's views don't align with one another." Athlete Four (a golfer) advanced a similar viewpoint: "it's definitely some kind of disagreement about a viewpoint or a certain way things should be done." Athlete Two (a volleyball player) also discussed disagreement in her view of conflict: " I guess I would see conflict as something negative, so generally a clash of ideas or personalities…or two sides not agreeing on a certain concept." Athlete Ten (a dancer) also commented that: "conflict could be anything really revolving around a disagreement between individuals or groups." Athlete Seven (a track/rugby player) viewed conflict as: "disagreements between two groups or two entities on a certain aspect." Finally, Athlete Nine (a hockey player) said that conflict in a team sport setting was: "A disagreement between two players on the same team …who don't necessarily see eye to eye and … rub each other the wrong way."

It was apparent that disagreement was one of the first things that came to mind when athletes thought of intra-group conflict because they stated it explicitly in their responses. As a caveat however, it was apparent that athletes did not consider conflict to be solely represented by disagreement. For example, Athlete Two (a volleyball player) suggested that conflict is of a greater severity than just disagreement: "The situation has to be pretty severe to call it conflict. I don't think it's something as simple as disagreeing on something … it has to really divide people and keep them divided … It has to be of a greater severity … like war, some huge kind of outbreak … like aggression, disagreement, all those things combined together, I don't see it as just a difference of opinion." A similar view of the nature of conflict was also stated by Athlete Nine (a hockey/lacrosse player): "[conflict is] not just a typical disagreement you might have with someone else; conflicts just go deeper than that and you're going to have worse arguments and more intense conflicts."

Affective. Consistent with the Barki and Hartwick (2004) conceptualization, athletes referenced the emotional aspects of conflict. Athlete Eight (a volleyball player) stated: "conflict is a lot more [intense], the emotional connection in the conflict is a lot more." Athlete Ten (a dancer) also referenced the negative emotions associated with her example of a conflict episode: "I did feel a little bit of resentment towards the group at times or at least towards particular individuals … it wasn't an enjoyable experience at all." Athlete Three (a curler) also recalled a conflict situation with her coach where emotions escalated: "The coach was extremely upset with me and kind of freaked out and yelled at me about the situation and almost threatened me in a way like 'if you do that again, either you or me is not going to be on this team anymore', so it kind of made me worry." It was also apparent that athletes felt that the situation becomes emotionally charged when individuals are in conflict situations. Many recalled that it took a toll

on them and often made them contemplate quitting the sport as Athlete Two (a volleyball player) noted "There were situations and times were I was like I don't want to do this anymore, this is not fun, I'm not getting anything out of this…and I know a lot of girls who didn't come back"

Behavioral. In discussing the conflict situations they had observed or in which they were involved, athletes repeatedly made references to specific behaviors that they felt made the interaction a conflict. For example, Athlete Five (a rower) recalled that: "in the boat, people would yell and scream and there was lots of swearing and a lot of frustration, so people would slam their oars down or fall out of the boat on purpose." The conflict situation Athlete Nine (a hockey/lacrosse player) recalled was characterized by: "lots of snide remarks, lots of sarcasm, lots of patronizing … it's pretty cruel stuff." A similar observation was made by both Athlete Six (a hockey player): "There would be verbal sarcasm, silent treatment and someone might ignore somebody if they are pissed off" and Athlete Seven (a track/rugby player): "it was a prime example of a negative culture … the bad mouthing and trash talking continued from the senior players and trickled down to the rookies and continues on every year."

Nature of Task Conflict

When athletes were queried about the nature of conflict, a clear element of task conflict arose. In addition to this emergence, an important overriding perception was that it (task conflict) is inevitable in competitive sport. For example, Athlete Eight (a volleyball player) observed: "If there is not some kind of conflict… than you're not that invested in it."

Also, typically, when athletes discussed conflict in task situations, its multidimensional nature (i.e., cognitive, affective, behavioral) was referenced. Athlete Five (a rower) stated: "If one person kind of screws up a little bit, the whole thing is ruined … so … I'd be so angry [with them]" (e.g., affective).

Also, Athlete Nine (a hockey/lacrosse player) pointed out: “When there’s conflicts around the task it’s usually two guys that are passionate and want the same results, but they are just going about achieving that result in different ways. They have different ideas on how they would go about it” (e.g., behavioral). Athlete Nine went on to say: “Guys just want to be heard and a lot of times guys are getting mad at other guys because they don’t see their point of view or don’t see their reasoning or thought process behind certain ideas or decisions” (e.g., cognitive).

Nature of Social Conflict

It appears that social conflict was also perceived by the athletes differently from their experiences. One of these can be classified as poor relations away from the sport. For example, Athlete Six (a hockey player) thought of it as: “When team members are not getting along off the ice.” Other athletes thought of social conflict as being more than simply not getting along. For example, Athlete Eight (a volleyball player), seemed to touch on various aspects of social conflict: “In the broad context, I would think of it as a general disagreement about one topic (e.g., disagreement)…and I think it has a really negative connotation associated with it” He then went on to elaborate…“People are being defensive (e.g., behavioral) and it’s like I’m getting attacked [personally] for this? I really have to stick up for myself or I just lose face in front of a lot of people” (e.g., affective).

As well as confrontations, social conflict also manifests itself through isolation and exclusion. We debated whether these behaviors were consequences of conflict or whether they reflected the nature of conflict. The context advanced by the athletes as well as the long-term nature of the isolation and exclusion led us to conclude that these were a manifestation of the perceived nature of conflict.

The behavioral act of isolating or excluding teammates could accompany disagreement as Athlete One (a rugby player) suggested: but also could be viewed as serious interference behaviors in social conflict. Athlete One made this clear when she stated: “lack of inclusion of others, I think that was our primary issue, exclusion was definitely one of the main conflict issues.” She went on to describe a specific situation that addressed this, “There was a group that began to isolate themselves more and have a [year end] party and purposely not invite certain people on the team to our final party… that was a big issue on the team.” (e.g., behavioral)

Athlete Ten (a dancer) reflected on the social conflict in her team and felt the tension just permeated through the group, as well as the interference she felt from her teammates attempting to exclude her from social events and the negative emotions she felt towards them: “In terms of social conflict, I could definitely tell that there were cliques in the group. Whether they were meant to happen or not [I don’t know]. I definitely felt excluded at times from particular cliques and especially because I did really enjoy everyone … I had a few really close friends on the team but I didn’t want to talk to anyone anymore and there were times I felt like I couldn’t talk to certain people on the team and I know I was not the only person that felt that way.”

Athlete Nine (a hockey/lacrosse player), reflected on a social conflict situation he experienced firsthand when significant others got involved: “I’ve seen personal things get involved too, and it’s a shame when it does, because you know normally its stuff that is totally unrelated [to the sport] but I mean, there’s conflicts on teams over girls and stuff like that and that’s when it gets a little bit harder to resolve because as teammates you want to help whoever is involved in the conflict to sort it out but in a situation where there’s external forces like girlfriends or something like that, where can you step in? You really can’t… so it’s definitely not limited to things within the team”

Discussion

The present study explored which perceptions members of competitive sport teams held about the nature of intra-group conflict. Athletes explained how they perceived conflict and what occurs during a typical conflict. Several examples supported the Barki and Hartwick (2004) suggestion that conflict contains cognitive, behavioral, and affective components. Insofar as the cognitive component is concerned, the term "disagreement" was mentioned several times with conflict being described as a disagreement, a difference of opinion, or differing viewpoints. This perspective of disagreement-as-conflict is consistent with the organizational psychology literature (e.g., Jehn, 1997). There is no disputing that disagreement is at the heart of any conflict; however, as the athletes noted, it typically does not stop at just disagreement. This notion also supports the findings from volunteer sport organizations that conflict goes beyond mere disagreement (Hamm-Kerwin et al., 2011).

Athletes also highlighted the affective component of conflict through references to negative emotional states, feelings of resentment, jealousy, anger, frustration, and irritation. In addition, athletes reported the presence of 'heavy' emotional investment and 'heated' emotional debates surrounding various issues. This perception of heightened emotion-as-conflict also has support in the organizational psychology literature (e.g., Amason, 1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997).

Finally, athletes also identified a behavioral component of conflict. The behavioral component reflected various actions or behaviors that the athletes undertook that led to the perception of the presence of conflict. Some behaviors mentioned included interference with attainment of goals, the presence of negative body language, avoidance behavior, silent treatment, and verbal and physical fighting. The perception of behaviors-as-conflict has been

highlighted in the work of Alper et al. (2000). Also, Dyer and Song (1997) considered conflict to be the interference with respect to the attainment of goals.

When athletes defined conflict, their response(s) typically included a reference to one or more of the Barki and Hartwick (2004) components—cognitions (e.g., disagreement), affect (e.g., emotion) and behavior (e.g., interference). All three components however were not referenced simultaneously in a single response but rather in multiple responses over the course of the interview. This also could have been due to the nature of the questions asked. As mentioned above, much of the organizational psychology literature has defined conflict-as-disagreement (e.g., Jehn, 1995, 1997). Jehn (1997) proposed that all conflicts have some degree of emotionality, but this proposal is not reflected in her definition. In the present study, several athletes alluded that conflict goes beyond just disagreement. These athletes' perspectives support the Barki and Hartwick (2004) proposal that conflict is a concurrent combination of three components.

Another point for discussion relates to the support found in the present results for the (deductive) categorization of conflict into task and social components based on (1) the conceptual model advanced by Jehn (1997) and (2) the findings highlighting performance and relationship conflict in sport (Holt et al., 2012). Our results are consistent with the Holt et al. (2012) findings and partially consistent with Jehn's (1997) conceptualization of conflict. Jehn (1997) indicated that "there is an apparent distinction between task and relationship [conflict] similar to other organizational theories that distinguish between task and interpersonal dimensions of organizational life" (p. 531). As was suggested earlier, this task and social distinction is well supported from various group dynamics theoreticians with regards to the orientation of groups (e.g., Carron et al., 1985; Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Fiedler, 1967).

Where our findings differ from Jehn's (1997) conceptualization is the limited support for process conflict in sport—which was an integral component of Jehn's (1997) conceptualization. The notion of process conflict in sport also did not seem to emerge in the results of the Holt et al. (2012) study. One possible explanation is that process issues are subsumed under the general category of task conflict. Recently, Bendersky et al. (2010) revised Jehn's original three dimensional conflict conceptualization (i.e., task, relationship, and process) and proposed that conflict was two dimensional – task and relationship conflict – and that process conflict was actually perceived as a form of task conflict. Another possible explanation for the absence of process conflict is the fundamental nature of elite level sport teams (which contrasts with the fundamental nature of work groups). Typically, in elite-level sport, the coach is responsible for establishing and dictating process (i.e., game strategies, player delegations, decisions on how things are done); the athletes typically have little to no input. In such an autocratic environment, there may be minimal opportunity for process conflict to emerge.

Competition between teammates also seemed to emerge as a possible type of intra-group conflict. Boardley and Jackson (2012) examined intra-group moral behavior when teammates are viewed as rivals. One finding from their study was that high task cohesion (specifically attraction to group-task) predicted greater antisocial behavior. The authors attributed the finding to some of the potential disadvantages of high task cohesion such as communication problems and reduced social relations (Hardy, Eys, & Carron, 2005). Considering that high task cohesion was associated with poor communication, reduced social relationships, greater anti-social behavior, perhaps elements of task conflict may also be associated with such findings. Researchers could assess the relationship between cohesion, conflict, and moral behavior within competitive sport teams to better understand the influence of these group processes on overall group functioning.

The importance of understanding intra-group conflict in sport teams also lends to the importance of learning the causes and implications that could stem from such conflict. In terms of possible causes, Jehn et al. (1999) found in a comparison of homogeneous vs. heterogeneous groups that diversity or differences among group members in values, goals, personality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status can all lead to conflict. In addition, Jehn and Bendersky (2003) found that individual differences could contribute to conflict. Future research should further investigate the possible antecedents of conflict in sport.

In terms of possible implications of conflict, the De Dreu and Weingart (2003) meta-analysis, found that both types of conflict (i.e., task and relationship) had negative relationships with performance and satisfaction. Similarly, in sport, popular outcomes that have been assessed are athlete satisfaction (e.g., Riemer & Chelladurai, 1998) and performance success (e.g., Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Considering the importance of both performance and satisfaction in the context of sport, a worthwhile endeavour for future research would be the assessment of the conflict-performance and conflict-satisfaction relationships.

Another point that warrants discussion is the possibility that positive outcomes may be associated with conflict. Some athletes suggested that task conflict, if resolved early, could be beneficial. Athletes also indicated that this type of conflict can be a growing moment and can help direct focus. The potential for positive outcomes has both been refuted (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and supported (e.g., Jehn & Mannix, 2001) in previous literature. In the present study, however, and consistent with previous research (e.g., Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), there were no perceived positive outcomes derived from social conflict. Future research in sport should continue to assess the potential for positive outcomes. Considering the inevitability of conflict, the ability for a team to derive positive outcomes from conflict would be profound.

Practical Implications and Future Directions

The following are some practical implications that coachers and/or sport psychology practitioners might consider when trying to manage or resolve conflict within their teams. First, conflict can arise around performance (i.e., task) or relationships (i.e., social) issues—a finding also reported in the Holt et al. (2012) study. Sport psychology practitioners can identify and isolate the context(s) in which the conflict occurred, so that situation-specific strategies can be developed and used to address these issues. Sport psychology practitioners should proactively develop (i.e., before the first presence of conflict) group norms that encourages the discussion of conflict openly (Jehn, et al., 2008). If athletes are in an environment where the open constructive discussion of conflict is acceptable and encouraged, the ability to address and resolve the conflict early becomes much more likely.

Another recommendation advanced from previous sport literature was to address conflict early (Holt et al., 2012). Previous organizational research has also echoed this point that high performing teams should deal with conflict in the early stages of their formation (Greer, Jehn, & Mannix, 2008). Due to the effects of both task and social conflict on both team performance and satisfaction (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), the importance of understanding how conflict may evolve and grow over time would certainly motivate those involved to resolve it quickly. The long lasting impact of conflicts that go unresolved would be detrimental for any high performance team (Greer et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2012).

Finally, from a sport perspective, a preventative measure for avoiding conflict may be the implementation of team building interventions early in the season (Holt et al., 2012). As many of the athletes in the present study noted, low cohesion and the presence of cliques often were issues associated with task and social conflict. For example, a focus on group norms could be a

useful tool here to establish structure. The development of agreed upon group norms establishes a set of behavioral guidelines for athletes to abide by which could go a long way to avoiding conflict issues (Paradis & Martin, 2012).

Carron and Spink (1993) also outlined in their conceptual model of team building that having athletes engage in sacrifice behaviors could be beneficial for improving the group's processes. Individual sacrifices that help others and are for the good of the team could help increase perceptions of cohesion and enable athletes to gain an appreciation of each other (Martin, Paradis, Eys, & Evans, 2013). Holt et al. (2012) also supported and advanced the recommendation of using team building interventions to aid in creating a cohesive atmosphere. Researchers and practitioners alike could assess the effectiveness of such team building interventions on the impact of conflict prevention.

Some limitations of the present study should be addressed. First, our sample was composed solely of intercollegiate athletes and thus, results may not be generalizable to other sport populations (e.g., children, youth, masters). Future research could explore intra-group conflict in these domains. Second, the qualitative process has only captured a snapshot of conflict from ten athletes who reflected on their specific sporting experiences. Future research could assess a larger more diverse sample to verify themes from the present study.

Overall, the results supported a conclusion that intercollegiate athletes viewed conflict as dynamic and complex in nature principally encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and affective components regarding task and social issues. The present study has served as a starting point for what is certainly a new discussion on the nature of conflict in sport. Future research could also utilise our results to aid in the development quantitative measures as it has been suggested that measurement is fundamental to the advancement of knowledge (Carron, Eys, & Martin, 2012).

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